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ABSTRACT

It may be true that global wars such as World Wars I and II are not very likely to break out in the near future, but during the last decennia all over the world violent local and regional conflicts have flared up. These conflicts, without exception, have a common denominator--a cultural component. They all have been triggered by ethnic, linguistic, or religious tensions, or by general cultural contrasts. This paper discusses, in general, interactions between cultures, noting the competition, distrust, fear, and violence that arise when cultural groups collide. To combat these cultural conflicts, the paper recommends an international code of conduct embedded in an "International Cultural Charter" to be underwritten by as many members of the international community as possible. Specifically, the charter should put down rules such as a person's right to use a native language in education, practice a religion, and have full access to and use of a cultural heritage and cultural industry. (BT)

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International conference 'Emerging democracies, citizinship and human rights education',

Enschede (Netherlands), June 18-21, 2000

'Cultural pluriformity: source of civilization - source of conflicts'.

Address to plenary session on June 21, 2000, by Mr. Maarten Mourik (Netherlands), poet, writer, former diplomat, i.a. ambassador to UNESCO. (His address: Langevliet 1, 1759 LE Callantsoog, Netherlands, tel. 0223-641652).

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...since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.
(from the Constitution of UNESCO)

To-day's world is as remote from lasting peace as it is from sustainable development. It may be true that global wars as World War I and II are not very likely to break out in the near future, although even such an event cannot be ruled out all-together. It may also be true that violent political-ideological conflicts like the wars in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan have been extinguished, although they are still smouldering on. But during the last decennia all over the world violent local and regional conflicts have flared up and in only too many places does one find latent hotbeds which may easily be sparked by an ill gust of wind.

Europe, which prides itself on being the cradle of western civilization, is the scene of a wide range of conflicts, both violent and latent. Conflicts that have burst open, we do not only find in Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union but also in Northern Ireland, in Corsica, in the Basque Provinces, in Cyprus. More or less latent conflictual situations we notice

again in Yugoslavia (Montenegro) and the Russian Federation, the Central Asian and Caucasian republics which formerly were part of the Soviet Union, and furthermore in [Scotland, Wales] Brittany, Alsace, Catalonia, Sardinia, Friule and Northern Italy, in Macedonia, Slovakia, Rumania and Bulgaria. Even sedate countries like Sweden and my own country, the Netherlands, have their friction points, the Samen and the Frisians respectively.

When we focus on other continents, the lists become longer and longer: Kurdistan, the genocide in Rwanda, the oppression of the Berber people in Algeria. The never ending struggle between Singhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, the present riots in Indonesia, in India, the Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the uneasy position of the Ainu in Japan, of the Yeminite jews in Israel, the turmoil in Chiapas (Mexico). And so on, and so on.

It is at this stage that I want to make an observation which is pivotal, crucial to the rest of my argument:

All those conflicts, whithout an exception, have a common denominator: they all have either exclusively but in any case to a high degree a cultural component, "cultural" taken in the wider sense of the term. They have all been triggered by ethnic, linguistic, religious tensions, or by general cultural contrasts, in various combinations. In Kosovo all these elements are acting together which may explain their vehemence. Kosovo, the epitome of all cultural conflicts. Sociologists might also point to the importance of socio-economic factors in these conflicts, but in my mind these are not autonomous factors but are rather of a derivative nature, derived in time from the aforementioned cultural factors.

How to explain their basic role in conflicts all around the world? For that purpose we have to delve into the depths of the human mind. But don't you worry, I shall not indulge in Freudian or other depth-psychology. A simple observation of ordinary human behaviour will suffice. It is the innate, atavistic, primordial distrust, bordering on fear and often spilling over into fear, for everybody and everything which deviates from what both a single person and a close community have learned to accept as normal, as standard customs and uses, as usual sights and attitudes. It is a herd-like reaction, indeed often observed in the animal world. Being different is equal to being ominous, menacing. Unfortunately the human mind has not yet been able to rid itself of this evolutionary reaction which in primeval ages may have contributed to survival, but which in our times rather leads to disaster.

It is here that for a moment we have to dwell upon the mechanics of cultural interrelationships in our world, which is greatly characterized by pluriformity. Mind you, cultural diversity is on the one hand of the greatest importance. Its positive side is its overriding role in the process of civilization. Civilizations from the earliest times on have come into being by the interaction of cultural groups (communities or entities) influencing and cross-fertilizing each other. Not always in a peaceful manner. Countless cultural communities have disappeared in this process. In many other cases the conquerors have taken over the cultural values of the defeated (Rome-Greece). Nevertheless this cross-fertilisation aspect of cultural interaction must in the long run be considered as highly beneficial to, even as the motor of the civilizationprocess. As I have often said before, paraphrasing a well-known French saying: *"Du choc des cultures jaillit la civilisation"*.

Cultural pluriformity, however, also has a dark side, a very dark one indeed. In the world of cultural diversity we live in, the interplay between larger or stronger and smaller or weaker cultural communities, between autonomous and dependent cultural entities, between majority and minority cultural groups does not take place on an equal basis. It engenders competition, not only in an economic sense, jockeying for position, powerplay and thereby, yes: distrust and fear. Fear on the side of the smaller or weaker party for being overruled, dominated, discriminated against, or even of being oppressed - and there are all sorts of sneeky ways for doing that - and eventually for being driven out of one's home and country. Ethnic cleansing, a horrible term for a horrible practise, the ultimate victory of barbarism.

The other party, the stronger or the bigger one - terms that do not always coincide - is driven by yet another set of primitive feelings: feelings of superiority, of being better and smarter than the other, the smaller or weaker one. One might call it overcompensated uncertainty. It manifests itself at best in a condescending attitude, quasi-tolerance, but in most cases it shows itself in disparaging and, one step further, in despising the other. Do not think this attitude only prevails in far-off countries. It is a virus which affects almost all of us. It may dominate our feelings towards neighbouring peoples, cities, regions and villages. Our reactions to differing tongues, skin-colours, and other people's religion. I daresay that it is at the roots of anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia and it is an obstacle to fully accepting immigrants and refugees. Let nobody think himself immune to this virus.

It is, therefore, not only the weaker and smaller cultural community that may live in fear; the same goes for the larger and stronger one. What the latter fear is being undermined from within by the minority. They fear subversion, treason or secession.

When such a mix of inflammable cultural tensions flares up, triggered by fear on both sides, one cannot but be deeply shocked by the atrocity of the ensuing struggle. In my view this has to do with the fact that the opponent is no longer an abstraction: the Russian, the Nigerian, the Iraqi, but the neighbour with whom one went to the pub, the man from the next village, with whom one played soccer. Who now cuts the throat of your father, rapes your wife and smashes your baby against the wall of your house, after having plundered it. These conflicts thereby become irrepairable from both sides and can only end in definite segregation. I, therefore, give little chance of success to the Bosnian experiment, nor do I foresee Serbs and Albanians ever to live peacefully together again in Kosovo, or Singhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka.

When I have strained your indulgence by dwelling so elaborately on the cultural and psychological roots of the many conflicts that tear our world apart, it was because one has to first make a thorough diagnosis before one can recommend a cure to the illness. But first an indirect remark on the notion of fear as a moving factor in international relations. I have put forward this idea for many years and, therefore, I felt myself very much supported when in 1997 there appeared a study by the American scholar, former diplomat and presidential advisor William R. Polk, 'Neighbours and Strangers, the Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs.' (Chicago University Press). His central thesis is that fear for the other is so deeply rooted, that it has become the decisive factor in the origin and further development of civilizations. I do not go along with him all that way, but nevertheless I feel very much ackowledged by his underlining the role of fear in intercultural relations.

Now that we have determined the roots of evil, two questions arise: can we counteract it, an if so, in what manner? Both questions can be answered in the affirmative. If mutual fear is at the roots of cultural conflicts, we have to eradicate fear. Fear cannot be combatted by power politics, not by economic measures, and certainly not by military means. All these means may be even counterproductive as we see in Kosovo. Fear can only be eliminated by gradually constructing

a system of confidence building elements. To that end I recommend already for years an international code of conduct establishing rules for proper behaviour between all, I repeat all, cultural communities, big or small, weak or strong, autonomous or dependent, majority or minority, national or transnational. This code of conduct, delineating mutual rights and obligations, should be embedded in an International Cultural Charter to be solemnly underwritten by as many members of the international community as possible. One could think of regional charters under the auspices of regional organisations, like for example the Council of Europe or the European Union, the Organisation of African States and similar bodies. Ideally there should be one charter under the aegis of the United Nations forming part and parcel of the codex of universal human rights accepted by the members of the world community.

Basic principles of such a Charter should be:

a. The equality of all cultural communities, within the limits of the aforesaid universal human rights.
b. The right to fully participate, both as an individual and a group in one's own culture.
c. Tolerance and
d. Solidarity.

This implies positive discrimination vis à vis smaller and weaker cultural entities.

More specifically the Charter should i.a. put down rules as to the right to use one's own language in education and where appropriate in local or regional administration and the media; the right to practice one's own religion, full access to and use of one's own cultural heritage and cultural industry. In order to alleviate the fear of sovereign states that the Charter may be invoked to justify particularism or even secession it should be made clear that there can be no question of abusing the Charter for those purposes.

Not only should the correct application of the rules of the Charter be supervised and monitored, in order to render it really effective, provisions should be made for exacting implementation from unwilling parties. The first task, the monitoring, might be entrusted to internationallly recognized judiciary bodies. Implementation by force is a much more complex problem. It may well be that the final outcome of the Kosovo drama will point to a possible way out of this problem.

Whatever the acceptance may be of the idea of an International Charter for Cultural Cooperation. I envisage a host of political, legal, judicial and other experts, wetting their knifes to raise a problem for each and every possible solution.

I would like to refer those people to history. International

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law has progressed step by step against improbable odds, political oppostion, legal quibbling and widespread scepticism. Who, fifty years ago, would have dreamed that sovereign states nowadays would be held accountable for their violation of human rigths conventions? Should our first priority not be to prevent another Rwanda or Kosovo?

Anyway, in Europe we would not have to start from scratch. Think of the Strasbourg based Council of Europe. Its European Cultural Convention dating from 1954 may be obsolete, but recently it accepted a framework convention for the protection of national minorities. In 1992 it agreed upon a European Charter for the protection of regional an minority languages. But above all there is its crown jewel: the European Convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, agreed upon as far back as 1950. Its European Court for human rights only last year saw its enforcing authority considerably expanded.
There also is the OSCE Paris Charter for the protection of minorities. So, experts who would have to work out an International Charter for Cultural Cooperation would already have a number of building blocks ready at hand.

An International Charter for Cultural Cooperation would also be highly beneficial to the hundreds of non represented peoples whose rights are non-existent or constantly trodden upon.

It would also accommodate a growing world-wide development where one notices people shrinking back from unforseen consequences of economic or political integration and globalisation. The geografic and material widening up of their regular sphere of life, and the subsequent ever growing distance between the individual and those who govern his or her dayly walk has caused many people and cultural groups to suffer from what I call cultural agoraphobia. They may not altogether turn their back on global developments but increasingly envelop themselves in their local or regional culture whose 'nest-warmth' gives them a feeling of safety and security. A Charter as advocated will enhance those feelings and alleviate their uneasiness vis à vis the encroaching outside world on which they have no grip.

Such a Charter would go far beyond regulating relationship between sovereign states and their cultural minorities. It would indeed lift all ethnic, religious, linguistic and otherwise culturally different groups to the same status in national and international law where now one finds homogeneous national cultures and national majority cultures.

It may not eleminate all cultural conflicts, but would take away their main sting: fear for the group that is different, fear for what is unknown. It would strenghten 'the defences of peace in the minds of men' and would be a great step forward on the weary road to durable peace.

Finally, I would express the hope that emerging democracies, who in many cases are particularly troubled by cultural conflicts will pay special attention to the idea of a cultural charter as a means to alleviate their troubles. It goes without saying that thorough human rights education will lay the spiritual basis for the acceptance of a charter as envisaged.

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